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## **A family mission in the land of the lost God Shalim: a talk with Kobi Farhi**

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# THEORY AND CRITICISM OF LITERATURE & ARTS

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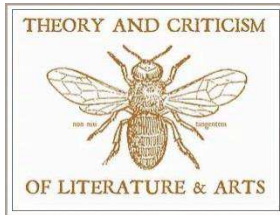


# THEORY AND CRITICISM OF LITERATURE AND ARTS

## *SPECIAL ISSUE*

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of the Carolingian *Lindau Gospels*, 8<sup>th</sup> century

# THEORY AND CRITICISM OF LITERATURE AND ARTS

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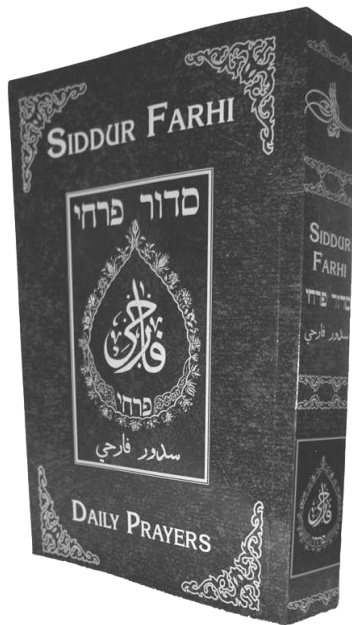




# A Family Mission in the Land of the lost God Shalim

## A talk with Kobi Farhi

Carla Rossi



In my last novel, I let a character say : «the duty of journalists, writers, poets, and intellectuals is not to stay cowardly locked up in asphyxiated forms of freedom, in a community, in an academy that is self-judging, self-incensing or self-phagocytizing, on the contrary : it is to go into the world stirring the consciences and building bridges among cultures».<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Hillel Yaacob Farhi (1868-1940), poet, translator, and physician has been this kind of intellectual. With his valuable translation of the daily Jewish prayer Book, the *Siddur*,<sup>2</sup> into the Arabic language he has been engaged in building cultural bridges between Arabs and Jews. The origin of his family dates back to the XII<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup> and it is as if the commitment to peace were written in the Farhi's NDA.

<sup>1</sup> *The other state* [original title *L'altro Stato*], Castelvechi, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Called after him *Siddur Farhi* (1917).

<sup>3</sup> According to *Les Fleurs de l'Orient* (online: farhi.org), and to M. Abitbol, *Les juifs d'Espagne: Histoire d'une diaspora (1492-1992)*, Liana Levi, Paris 1992, the first documented Farhi (Ishtori) lived during the XIII<sup>th</sup> century in Provence, France, under the protection of the Popes d'Avignon. It was Christian custom to give Jews a surname taken from their city of origin and Ishtori was given the family name Ha Farhi from his Catalan hometown Florencia, from *flor* (flower in Spanish). This became Perah in Hebrew (*sweet fruit, flower*), thus "HaFarhi". The name HaFarhi became later simply Farhi. Ishtori descended from a line of sages and rabbis of fame. His father was Rabbi Moshe HaParhi, a distinguished Talmudical scholar. His grandfather was Rabbi Nathan of Trinquetaille, author of *Shaar HiTefisa*. His great grandfather was Meir ben Isaac of Carcassonne, author of the *Sefer ha-'Ezer*. Ishtori himself was the author of the first Hebrew book on the geography of Eretz Yisrael, the *Sefer Kaftor Vaferach* (Hebrew: ופרח כפתור ספר, literally "Button and Flower"), published in Venice only in 1549. After the Spanish Inquisition, some Farhi may have moved south to North Africa but many Jewish families emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. From there, they traveled north to Bulgaria and Romania, Russia, West to Tunisia and North Africa, East to Syria, Lebanon, Irak and even Iran, south to Palestine and Egypt.



Kobi Farhi, who composes politically-charged songs, boldly recognises himself in the mission of the family from which he descends. He is the lead singer and founder of a pioneering Israeli band, *Orphaned Land*, engaged since the early Nineties in promoting a message of understanding and harmony through dialogue and tolerance between the three main Abrahamic religions.

Like the author of the *Siddur Farhi*, whose second name he bears,<sup>4</sup> Kobi «goes into the world stirring the consciences». He writes lyrics

aimed at an audience more than just Israeli and Palestinian. Remaining ideally (and probably unintentionally) in the wake of the thought of Hillel, the song *El Norra Alila*<sup>5</sup> – just to choose one of the band's many – is based on a poem sung during Yom Kippur as a plea of forgiveness. And *Yedidi*, a song from *Orphaned Land* newest album,<sup>6</sup> is a re-working of a traditional Hebrew song.<sup>7</sup> In the *Song of Songs*, Jewish tradition identifies God as the beloved friend, *Dodi* and *Yedid*, to whom we should cleave. *Yedid Nefesh* is probably one of the most widely-known and versatile Jewish liturgical poems. It can be sung during the *Morning Prayer* (T'fillat HaShahar) or the *Afternoon Service* (Minha), but it is especially associated with the Sabbath. It was written in the Middle Ages by Eliezer Azkari as a beautiful expression of passionate personal love of God and here's how *Orphaned Land* reworked it, managing to integrate it harmoniously into the concept of their album *Unsung Prophets & Dead Messiahs* :

כַּחַת חֲנוּתָהּ בְּבִין שְׂדֵי־יְדִידִי הָשׁ  
וְלִמָּה מְכַרְתִּנִּי צְמִיתוֹת לְמַעְבִּידִי  
הֲלֹא אֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה רִדְפָתִיךָ  
וְשָׁעִיר וְהָר פֶּאֶרֶן וְסִינִי וְסִין עָדִי  
וְהָיוּ לְךָ דּוֹדִי וְהָיָה רְצוֹנְךָ בִּי  
יִוָּאֵיךְ תִּתְחַלֵּק עִתָּהּ כְּבוֹדִי לְבִלְעָד

[Translation]

My friend have you forgotten resting between my breasts?

<sup>4</sup> Kobi being a diminutive of the name Yaakov.

<sup>5</sup> Which also gives the name to the second album of the band, released in 1996, meaning "Illustrious God".

<sup>6</sup> *Unsung Prophets & Dead Messiahs*, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *Yedid Nefesh* (Hebrew: יְדִיד נֶפֶשׁ יְדִיד did nefesh) is the title of a *piyyut* that reflects on the relationship with God.

Why have you sold me to my enslavers for aye?  
Then, upon an orphaned land have I not chased after you?  
Seir, and Mount Paran, and Sinai, and Sin – my witnesses  
For you were my love, and I was given to your will  
And now, will you bestow your honor upon others?

Over time, the band has developed a «musical syncretism that treats the group's dual location in Israel and the global Metal scene not as problematic but as a rich source of musical ideas»,<sup>8</sup> bringing religious melodies into a space that is considered antipathetic to religion and having the transgressive power to break down religious borders in the Middle East. Despite their songs are soaked with a strong spiritual afflatus that brings back to the origins of the world, on biblical themes, the majority of the band members declared themselves atheist or agnostic.

In 2012 *Orphaned Land* received *The Friendship And Peace Award* from the Turkish government. Since then, there is a petition to nominate *Orphaned Land* for the Nobel Peace Prize, on the grounds that they are able to unite fans from different countries having extremely difficult diplomatic relations, including Turkey, Syria, Iran, Palestine, Lebanon and Israel.

It seems to me that the band is fully part of a current of Jewish thought that manages to conceive the work of art and its salvific role on a long distance perspective, fitting, on the other hand, into an Israeli culture of protest that is a relatively new phenomenon, even if it emanates from an ancient Jewish tradition of debate and dissent.

In fact, in the Jewish cultural tradition, since the XV<sup>th</sup> century, much music has been written not to be performed, but as an evidence of the passage of its authors on this Earth, as a positive message of hope for the future generations. Songs that, in the specific case of *Orphaned Land*, poetically invite us to become aware of our reality, an increasingly virtual reality, in which we are trapped.

## A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE : WE CHOOSE TO LIVE IN THIS DARKENED CAVE, FAR FAR AWAY FROM THE LIGHT<sup>9</sup>

Since artists may sometimes offer us alternative versions of – and even redemptive visions for – our troubled world, I decided to have a chat with Kobi Farhi.

<sup>8</sup> *Music, popular Culture, Identities, Critical Studies*, ed. R. Young, 2002, 145.

<sup>9</sup> *Orphaned Land, The Cave*, in *Unsung Prophets & Dead Messiahs*, 2018.

Like every nation that stands on monumental vestiges of history, Israel is a labyrinth of contradictions and Farhi is able to lather his Nation's antonyms onto heavy metal music and make them shine. Each *Orphaned Land* album develops a concept related to two extremes : a meeting of East and West, past and present, light and darkness, God and Evil.

The concept of the band's latest album mainly focuses on the Allegory of Plato's Cave, presented by the Greek philosopher in his work *Republic* (514a–520a) to compare «the effect of education (παιδεία) and the lack of it on our nature».

QUESTION: Since 1991 the compositions of *OL* are evolving and improving, but after almost thirty years of activity what clearly emerges from your lyrics is a sort of constant panglossian temptation, the temptation to «leave the cave». Don't you think that the idea that culture – such as poetry, music, arts –, encouraged by hope and guided by reason will rescue civilisation from the stain of its own barbarism, especially in a period when dark political shadows loom over the world, is a little naïve, and foolishly optimistic?

FARHI No, I don't. *We are doomed to stay in Plato's cave until we will overcome to change the way we are educated. It is a pattern that goes on for centuries : hundreds of people, who tried to get out of the cave bringing people out with them, ended up been assassinated, just think to Muḥammad Anwar al-Sādāt, or Yitzhak Rabin. Unfortunately, the allegory of the cave is still valid, after centuries, and that's what our latest album is about : we live in an Orwellian reality, attached to screens brainwashing us, something similar to the virtual reality of the shadows projected on the walls of the Platonian cave. We are junkies of images that keep us calm and addicted and we know very little about what really happens in the world.*

*I believe that, as Janusz Korczak said, "If you want to change the world, change the educational system". Politicians are well aware that the best way to control people's mind is to control their education, that's why they are interested in keeping our educational system the way it is. The sooner we take action for a serious educational reform, an education that incorporates both practical, subject-based schooling and a focus upon the socialization of individuals and the respect for cultures other than one's own, the sooner our grandchildren will enjoy the fruits of our engagement.*

Farhi talks about "our grandchildren" as possible beneficiaries of actions that must be taken immediately. We are the so-called Generation X, children born during a time of shifting societal values. Research describes us as active, and achieving a work–life balance, since we have grown up in a relative well-being that has allowed many of us to follow our own "eu" (good) "daimon" (spirit), our own vocation. In the 1990s we were sometimes characterized as slackers, cynical

and disaffected, in midlife even more than our grandparents, who lived through the Second World War, we are used to seeing images of war and death, and we are developing the antibodies of indifference to the suffering of *the others*. We have to remain vigilant, because, to quote Gramsci (1917), «indifference works powerfully in history. It works passively. It is brute matter that strangles intelligence», and we risk getting trapped in propaganda. Nazi propaganda shaped much of the conception of Judaism in the 1930s and today anti-Muslim propaganda is doing the same, as Farhi claims.

*In Propaganda*<sup>10</sup>

Suffer to live  
Drown in lies  
Orphans are we  
Born to be the ones with open eyes  
The rest are trapped in propaganda  
They are the blind  
Bereft of all sight  
Set free your mind  
So you may depart this endless night  
The rest are trapped in propaganda.

QUESTION Like many of us in Generation X, you have been able to follow your own *eudemon*, your vocation, so what is your understanding of the role of Art? Has Art to provoke the established power? If this is the case, how loud must be the voice of the artists shouting?

FARHI *For me Art has to be the voice of Truth. It's something that we witness during our concerts and throughout our career. How loud, you ask? As loud as possible! Music happens to be the tool that many people can connect with easily...So, we have to be like Orpheus.*

Farhi here alludes to the fact that in Phaedrus' speech, contained in the *Symposium*, Plato inserts Orpheus in the group of Sophists, since he uses his Art and his words to persuade. As Farhi sings in *Poets Of Prophetic Messianism*, quoting the Republic of Plato: ἡ δοκοῦσί τί σοι τυφλῶν διαφέρειν ὁδὸν ὀρθῶς | πορευομένων οἱ ἄνευ νοῦ ἀληθές τι δοξάζοντες.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Orphaned Land, *Unsung Prophets*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> Anyone who holds a true opinion without understanding is like a blind man on the right road.



Last September, *Orphaned Land* won the Prog Music Award as “Best Video of the Year” with the following song :

*Like Orpheus*<sup>12</sup>

Close my eyes, I cannot see  
Sudden blindness upon me  
This ray of light is so unknown  
From womb of darkness I am born  
Lift the veil of shade forever  
Like a candle that's within me  
I receive the gift of sight  
And rise !  
This life is a storm that rages on  
Fire, wind, the earth and sea are one  
I sing before you all like  
Orpheus with torch in hand  
The cave it still lies within  
Like a never ending sin  
Paint these walls with crimson light  
The phoenix now is taking flight  
Stare back to the abyss  
“Hades who rules there shall grant thee salvation”  
Like the snow that brings December  
I am the spark that sets the flame of truth alight  
And fight !  
And this life is the pain of being born  
Man, child and woman all are one  
I sing before you all...  
Like Orpheus

QUESTION Talking about a subject that seems to fascinate you, the interrelation between Evil and Good, I would like to know your opinion on a phrase by Goethe, also taken up by Bulgakov in *Master and Margarita* and by many other writers and philosophers. When Mephisto was asked by Faust, "Well now, who are you then?", the Devil gave the well-known answer: “I am part of that eternal force that always wills the evil and always produces the good”.

<sup>12</sup> Orphaned Land, *Unsung Prophets*, cit.

FARHI *Yes, what a great answer, isn't it? And it is so true! Good and Evil are just two sides of the same coin, "Satan", can be a friend, a mentor that helps and teach us many lessons by hurting us. My personal opinion is that darkness does not really exist, it is just a situation of "no light". I firmly believe that there is no art, poetry, music and even comedy if there is no pain, agony and sadness. It's all connected together as a Yin and Yang, or as I use to call it many times, as the tango between God & Satan.*

QUESTION One gets the distinct impression that writing songs is just one your multiple creative praxes, proving right one of the most-quoted poetic lines of all time, revisited: *ut musica poesis* and that you could also be a novelist or a poet. Is it true?

KOBI *I was thinking to write my own book, but my time is so full with OL so I keep this aside for the moment, who knows, I might be a full time writer in my 50's or 60's!*

QUESTION If Israel had become a land of peace and harmony, the land of the lost Canaanite God of peace Shalim, would you have continued composing?

KOBI *Israel is just one country that has many goods and bads like any other. It is just our starting point, but we refer the whole world as an Orphaned Land.*

QUESTION Last July, the Knesset has passed into law a highly controversial bill that serves to define the nature of the state : Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people. So, with regard to identity, what does it mean to you to be an Israeli today?

KOBI *Considering the Jewish terrible history of persecutions, I am happy to be an Israeli and to live in a place where we shape our own destiny. Jews coming back to their biblical homeland was an utopia that has turned into reality, this could have been seen as a true messianic salvation before it happened, even to the religious Jews, but the irony is that Zionism and all this movement and amazing story of coming back to Zion, started by a secular group of Jews. This is the "divine" comedy in many ways and yet I am still happy it has happened. Things are far from being perfect here, and there are a lot of things to change, to work, to fix, between us, between us and our neighbors, but I am a man of hope, it's very hard as I am 43 years old already and bitterness and sarcasm are knocking on my door every day, but I keep the faith, I keep the hope, and I believe that education is the key to transforming the world.*

*Orphaned Land* deserve a sociological analysis that goes beyond the scope of this interview, but that *TCLA* is ready to address in a future issue. I would like to end this brief article by recalling that a campaign is underway in the world to boycott anything remotely resembling a link to the Jewish State. But BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] proponents seem not to understand that it is not by fomenting the “clash of civilisation” that peace can be achieved. A cultural dialogue and a collaboration is more important than ever before in Israel and this cultural boycott is divisive, discriminatory and counterproductive. As I wrote in my already quoted novel *The other state*, by getting a fictional journalist talk : “We and they use the same word, dam, to call blood: because ours and their blood is identical. The example should start precisely from these lands”.

Art civilises, challenges and reminds us of our common humanity. So, go and perform in Israel, read your poems and stories there, make your music there, hold your university lectures there, because you will also have a huge Palestinian audience there. Kobi is fighting hard to make it clear : performing in Israel does NOT mean supporting Apartheid. On the contrary, it means being able to make the voice of dissent heard by an audience that, otherwise, risks being brainwashed by politicians. Cultural boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory, and will surely not further peace !

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Picture of K. F. ©Back and Forth

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